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(Anti-)Colonialism, religion and science in Bengal from the perspective of global religious history

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Abstract

This article focuses on debates about the relationship between religion, science and national identity that unfolded in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal. Combining perspectives from religious studies and global history, it offers a specific approach to theoretical and methodological issues revolving around entanglement, agency and modernity. This will be operationalized, first, through an exploration of personal networks surrounding the Bengali Tantric pandit Shivachandra Bhattacharya Vidyarnava; his Bengali disciple, philosopher and nationalist educator, Pramathanath Mukhopadhyay and Shivachandra's British disciple, the judge John Woodroffe. Second, an investigation of the connections between self-referentially 'orthodox' societies, so-called reformers, and the Theosophical Society will further illustrate the global exchanges that conditioned and shaped contemporary debates about religion, science and politics. This will complicate and shed new light on the contested relationship between modernity and tradition, or reformism and orthodoxy, opening new perspectives for further dialogue between religious studies and global history.

Key words: colonialism; Bengal; religion; science; national education; Hinduism

Studying the exchange of ideas through connections that might be considered 'global' has motivated constructive and lively debates in intellectual history. Religious studies, on the other hand, are only beginning to engage with the questions of *what* exactly might theoretically be considered 'global,' and *how* 'global' connections might be methodologically investigated.¹ A dialogue between scholars of global, intellectual and religious history would be specifically rewarding, not only because they derive many of their theoretical and methodological strengths from the fact that approaches to their governing subjects are highly disputed; but also because religious studies, as the arguably 'oldest' of the disciplines in question, are inherently intertwined with orientalist studies, their colonial framework and the very act of comparison that motivated nineteenth-century 'comparative religion,' which gave rise to *Religionswissenschaft*, or religious studies. Indeed, the discipline's truly 'global' history and its heritage might itself be considered a prime example of the challenges of Eurocentrism, orientalism and intellectual exchanges under colonialism.

It is well established that religion lies at the core of central issues that have been debated by global historians for decades, including nineteenth-century racial and linguistic theories, social reform movements and the elusive subject of 'modernity.' There is wide agreement that, in the words of Peter van der Veer, 'modernity has a global history' that was not simply shaped

¹Giovanni Maltese and Julian Strube, 'Global Religious History', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 33, no. 3–4 (2021).

by the colonizers.² ‘Modern’ movements that vigorously debated the meaning of religion and its relevance for ‘reform,’ in both Britain and its Indian colony, were not only interlinked but mutually dependent.³ Unquestionably, these dynamics were marked by the complicity between imperialism and comparative religion, which often served colonial administrations: Peter Gottschalk has discussed in some detail how the notion of a ‘scientific’ study of religion functioned as ‘a universally applicable classificatory regimen in order to intellectually and/or politically manage the human diversity encountered globally. In other words, political rule of foreign societies required understanding their underlying systems of social organization.’⁴

At the same time, scholars have complicated the history of comparative religion (and hence, religious studies) by increasingly examining its emergence from a global perspective.⁵ While David Chidester has stressed ‘the importance of empire in the formation of comparative religion,’ he refocused the historiography of comparative religion from its colonizing functions in the peripheries to the intellectual knowledge production of the (colonial) metropolis, where local, ‘indigenous’ knowledge entered a complicated yet productive relationship with that of the colonizers.⁶ ‘Religion’ was indeed a novel comparative category applied to ‘non-Western’ subjects, yet it is crucial to bear in mind that the category was not a ready-made ‘Western’ export but hotly contested in ‘the West,’ as well. Its unstable meanings were continuously conditioned and structured by global exchanges. Indians played a decisive role in the process, partaking in the construction of the still-debated category ‘Hinduism’ and its relation to other ‘religions.’⁷ This category is certainly a ‘modern’ one, but it was not simply Western. Brian Pennington has underlined the participation of Indians on its negotiation and highlighted how misleading it would be to separate Hindu groups into either ‘reformers’ or ‘orthodox,’ since this ‘has for too long obscured the modern character of emerging Hindu organizations; their mutually shared goals, interests and strategies; and their common passion for preserving and embodying the ancient past.’⁸ The respective historical debates should not be viewed in simplistic terms of a clash between local tradition and Western (scientific) modernity, but within the framework of a globally entangled emergence and development of comparative religion and religious studies. Indeed, J. Barton Scott has pleaded for situating ‘Hindu reformism as part of the cultural history of the study of religion in the nineteenth century,’ highlighting the decisive role played by one of the most famous Indian reform movements in the emergence of comparative religion: the Bengali Brahmo Samaj, which will also be of primary concern in this present paper.⁹

Expanding on these insights, I am going to illustrate a combination of religious studies and global history approaches in order to shed more light on historical debates about the meanings

²Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 7, 160. Also see Shalini Randeria, ‘Geteilte Geschichte und verwobene Moderne’, in *Zukunftsentwürfe: Ideen für eine Kultur der Veränderung*, ed. Jörn Rüsen, Hanna Leitgeb and Norbert Jegelka (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1999), 87.

³*Ibid.*, 43.

⁴Peter Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 50–52.

⁵See my most recent argument in Julian Strube, ‘Rajnarayan Basu and His “Science of Religion”: The Emergence of Religious Studies through Exchanges between Bengali and Christian Reformers, Orientalists, and Theosophists’, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 33, no. 3–4 (2021).

⁶David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), xi, 2–11.

⁷For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Julian Strube, ‘Hinduism, Sanātana Dharma, and the Global Struggle about “True Religion”’, in *Conceptualizing Islam*, ed. Frank Peter, Paula Schroder, and Ricarda Stegmann (Abingdon: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁸Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 171.

⁹J. Barton Scott, ‘A Commonwealth of Affection: Modern Hinduism and the Cultural History of the Study of Religion’, in *Constructing Nineteenth-Century Religion*, ed. Joshua King and Winter Jade Werner (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), 47, 51–53.

of ‘religion’ and ‘science,’ which were tied into contemporary debates about the supposed origin of ‘Aryan’ civilization in India. My analysis is based on an exploration of three interrelated authors who shaped a global discourse on Indian religion, its relationship to ‘the West,’ and the academic disciplines devoted to the study of religion: the Bengali Tantric pandit Shivachandra Bhattacharya Vidyarnava (1860–1913), his Bengali disciple, philosopher and nationalist educator, Pramathanath Mukhopadhyay (1880–1973) and Shivachandra’s British disciple, the judge Sir John Woodroffe (1865–1936), who worked in Kolkata (then Calcutta) from 1890 until 1922. These three individuals are connected through ‘Arthur Avalon,’ a pseudonym long believed to represent Woodroffe only but that actually stood for a collaboration between learned South Asians, mainly Bengalis, who sought to present Tantra as the ‘esoteric’ core, not only of ‘true dharma’ but also of a universal religion of humanity.¹⁰ The editions, translations and studies published by the Avalon team transformed scholarly and popular perceptions of Tantra, almost single-handedly established its serious academic study, and still serve as an inspiration for researchers and practitioners alike.

Shivachandra’s magnum opus, *Tantratattva* (1893), was among the first and most prominent productions of the Avalon team, translated as *Principles of Tantra* in 1914/16. For our concerns, the work is especially instructive because it allows for insights into the dynamics between local traditions, rivalries and the manifold global connections linked to them through the colonial context. On one hand, Shivachandra engaged critically with Bengali Vaishnava traditions and Vedantic philosophy; on the other hand, he denounced English education and the reform movements allegedly corrupted by it, most importantly, the members of the Brahmo Samaj—who at the time were widely associated with ‘Vedanta’—and the members of the Arya Samaj, who were major competitors in the quarrels about the meaning of ‘Aryan dharma.’ Shivachandra’s polemics largely revolved around the notions of philosophy (Bengali *darśan*) and science (*vijñān*), which were dismissed in favour of Tantric ritual practice (*sādhana*), which Shivachandra presented as thoroughly scientific and experiential.¹¹

Shivachandra’s follower Pramathanath, in turn, is instructive of the complexity of Bengali (and other Indian) engagements with global debates about philosophy and science. After obtaining an M.A. in philosophy, he joined in the ‘nationalist resurgence’ and ‘dedicated himself to the service of the motherland,’ in the words of his later followers.¹² He became a professor at the National Council of Education, where Aurobindo Ghosh was among his colleagues. He later joined the Ripon College, teaching philosophy, mathematics and physics. Hence, he stood at the heart of the controversial issues of education and science, which became an integral part of the anti-colonial Swadeshi movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rather than simply accepting ‘Western’ scientific frameworks and language, Pramathanath developed a highly creative philosophical-scientific system of thought that heavily drew from local traditions, especially from the sphere of Tantric Shaktism (i.e., those traditions focusing on Shakti as a manifestation of the Goddess).

This illustrates how the Avalon project was not driven by the leadership or ‘Western perspective’ of Woodroffe. Indeed, shifting the focus on the participants and collaborators on that project from its supposed ‘Western’ mastermind to a diverse group of individuals and their local contexts opens new ways of looking at the contested issue of knowledge production under colonialism. Similar to his Indian partners, Woodroffe’s major concern with notions of science, religion

¹⁰The Bengali background of Arthur Avalon and its global context are comprehensively explored in Strube, Julian Strube, *Global Tantra: Religion, Science, and Nationalism in Colonial Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); cf. Kathleen Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: An Indian Soul in a European Body?* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001).

¹¹Strube, *Global Tantra*, 174–85; cf. Strube, ‘Tantra as Experimental Science in the Works of John Woodroffe’, in *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents on Academia around 1900*, ed. Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

¹²Swami Pratyagatmananda Saraswati, *The Complete Works of Swami Pratyagatmananda Saraswati*, vol. 1 (Chanduli/Calcutta: Saranam Asram, 1980), 7.

and ‘national education’ was rooted in the idea that modern materialist science only superficially approached an ancient ‘Aryan’ wisdom long lost and forgotten. The revival of that wisdom would not only elevate India from its subordinate role but also lead the way to a new stage in the development of humanity as a whole. Crucially, these ideas were not a ‘Western’ orientalist projection but the outcome of (mostly) Bengali discourses that were mirrored by both the writings of Avalon and Woodroffe.

The world-wide impact and emergence of this collaboration allow for demonstrating the methodological usefulness and historical substance of ‘entanglements’ between local and global contexts, of which our three authors are representatives: Shivachandra as a self-proclaimed ‘orthodox’ pandit educated in a specific Bengali tradition of Sanskritic Brahmanical learning; Pramathanath as an influential anti-colonial educator synthesizing Tantric (Shakta) and European philosophy, and Woodroffe as a prominent member of the colonial administration at the High Court of Kolkata. Two institutional contexts, to which all three actors were connected, will further illuminate the local and global networks through which these exchanges emerged and unfolded: first, self-referentially ‘orthodox’ societies that proclaimed rivaling understandings of *dharma* (often translated as ‘religion’), and second, the Theosophical Society. These examples will highlight the historiographical complications arising from strict distinctions between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition,’ but also between binary cultural models such as ‘East and West’ or ‘Hindu and non-Hindu.’ My analysis will focus on how religion was contested and constantly renegotiated within globally entangled debates that related ‘it’ to issues such as science, education and national identity under colonialism.

Global religious history

The approach of global religious history is proposed here to unravel and explore the tangle of exchanges that will emerge in what follows.¹³ It may also serve to contribute to ongoing debates about the meaning of ‘global,’ as well as related theoretical and methodological concepts such as connections, entanglement and agency. The point of departure of global religious history is the fact that ‘religion,’ like ‘Hinduism’ and other terms that occupy scholars of religion are used globally today and that they were shaped within historical contexts in which ‘non-Western’ actors played an active and significant role. Instead of assuming the ‘Western’ character of religion and its unilateral diffusion through colonialism, global religious history aims at understanding how the contested meanings of religion have emerged historically, by consistently working backwards chronologically and exploring the historical developments that structured and conditioned debates about religion. By continuously asking what connections exist between today’s global use of ‘religion’ and those historical debates, it avoids (crypto-)essentialist quarrels about origins and authenticity.¹⁴ While Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted that European knowledge is ‘now everybody’s heritage,’¹⁵ it has undeniably spread through colonialism and imperialism.¹⁶ Yet, this does not mean that ‘it’ was clearly defined and fixed to begin with, and that it remained ‘Western’ in the process. The crucial point is to acknowledge that the meanings of ‘religion’ have been radically

¹³I fully operationalize this approach in Strube, *Global Tantra*. For a foundational piece, see Michael Bergunder, ‘Umkämpfte Historisierung: Die Zwillingsgeburt von “Religion” und “Esoterik” in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts und das Programm einer globalen Religionsgeschichte’, in *Wissen um Religion: Erkenntnis – Interesse: Epistemologie und Episteme in Religionswissenschaft und Interkultureller Theologie*, ed. Klaus Hock (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020); see also Maltese and Strube, ‘Global Religious History’.

¹⁴Michael Bergunder, ‘What is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies’, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (2014): 275–79.

¹⁵Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16, 255.

¹⁶Andreas Eckert and Shalini Randeria, ‘Geteilte Globalisierung’, in *Vom Imperialismus zum Empire: Nichtwestliche Perspektiven auf Globalisierung*, ed. Andreas Eckert and Shalini Randeria (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 11.

transformed, or outright emerged, during the very period of colonialism, which means that this happened, inevitably, within a global context.

Such a perspective offers a way forward for debates within religious studies. Scholars such as Timothy Fitzgerald and Russell McCutcheon have argued that the use of the notion of religion outside of Europe entails a Eurocentric bias.¹⁷ Fitzgerald has rightly pointed out the power asymmetries determining exchanges under colonialism,¹⁸ stressing that studying Hinduism as religion, for instance, constitutes an act of epistemic violence.¹⁹ From the perspective of global religious history, however, this runs the danger of reproducing the claims of cultural incommensurability and the very Eurocentrism that historical scholarship should complicate: religion was not simply a Western export but its meanings were negotiated—in both Europe and South Asia—through global exchanges. Certainly, the inhabitants of colonial India had to react to extreme power asymmetries, but not only did they participate on global debates about the meaning of religion, they *actively* and significantly shaped them.

Today, many scholars agree that it would be mistaken to assume a unidirectional diffusion of ‘the Western concept of religion’ into the rest of the world.²⁰ Yet, the challenge lies in striking a balance between awareness of colonial power structures and the agency of colonized people. Although experts might take (self-)reflection of Eurocentrism for granted, scholarship still abounds with more or less subtle expressions of the alleged diffusion of European achievements culminating in modernity.²¹ This particularly regards the subjects of this paper, for instance, the persistent assumption that Woodroffe was solely responsible for the Avalon project,²² or the study of Theosophy and its activities in India under the rubric of ‘Western esotericism.’²³ The Theosophical Society is, indeed, highly relevant for global historical questions, since its importance is widely acknowledged but not explored from a global perspective.²⁴ On the contrary, the Society is emblematic for misleading historiographical juxtapositions of East and West, for instance, in Jürgen Osterhammel’s statement that it was an expression of an ‘irrationalism polemically counterposed to the Western faith in reason.’²⁵ It is also an outstanding example of the ambiguities of power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized, as previous scholars,

¹⁷Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁸Timothy Fitzgerald, ‘Introduction’, in *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*, ed. Timothy Fitzgerald (London: Equinox Publishing, 2007), 9.

¹⁹*Ideology*, 134–35.

²⁰Michael Bergunder, ‘“Religion” and “Science” Within a Global Religious History’, *Aries* 16, no. 1 (2016): 87; cf. Adrian Hermann, *Unterscheidungen der Religion: Analysen zum globalen Religionsdiskurs und dem Problem der Differenzierung von “Religion” in buddhistischen Kontexten des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 200.

²¹Cf. Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3–4; Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, ‘Einleitung: Geteilte Geschichten – Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt’, in *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Sebastian Conrad, Shalini Randeria, and Regina Römhild (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus Verlag, 2013), 35–36; Robert A. Yelle, *The Language of Disenchantment: Protestant Literalism and Colonial Discourse in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), ix–x, 6–7.

²²This has already been disproven by Taylor, *Woodroffe*.

²³Julian Strube, ‘Towards the Study of Esotericism Without the “Western”: Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History’, in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021).

²⁴Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden/Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 365; Sebastian Conrad, ‘A Cultural History of Global Transformation’, in *A History of the World*, ed. Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 582. The exception is Hans Martin Krämer and Julian Strube, eds., *Theosophy Across Boundaries: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).

²⁵Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 813.

such as Gauri Viswanathan, have exclusively focused on its white, Anglophone members without taking the agency of ‘the others’ into account.²⁶

Reform and revival in colonial modernity

The perception of ‘Indian traditions’ conflicting with ‘Western modernity’ often lies at the heart of this issue. Indeed, some might be inclined to view my investigation of the relationship between Shivachandra, Pramathanath and Woodroffe in terms of a meeting of the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional.’ Yet, I argue for the futility of making a clear distinction between the two. This becomes especially tangible in light of the fact that much of what I am going to discuss is considered part of ‘Hindu revivalism.’ This notion refers to the burgeoning of Hindu identities towards the end of the nineteenth century, often with an anti-colonial and nationalist thrust. The idea that the notion of ‘revival’ is useful for analytically grasping these historical developments has come under fire for decades.²⁷ The term was indeed used by contemporaries, but it was hotly disputed what should be revived, how it should be revived and if the language of revival made any sense at all. Obviously, revival implies that something has been dead or dormant—debates about whether that was the case, and what that ‘something’ was to begin with, directly pertain to the modernity versus tradition issue.

Like Shivachandra, Pramathanath and Woodroffe, those affiliated with revivalist cohorts referred to the *sanātana dharma* (the eternal, unchanging dharma), *ārya dharma* (Aryan dharma) or *hindu dharma* to denote what they wished to restore. Opinions on the nature of ‘true’ dharma, however, varied drastically. This resulted not least from local conflicts between different factions considered ‘Hindu’—for instance, with regard to the place of Tantra in Hinduism and the relationship between the Tantras and the Vedas—but also from the role of ‘non-Hindu’ traditions, notably Islam. Moreover, we are frequently confronted with ambiguities between universalistic tendencies that presented ‘true dharma’ as the core of a universal religion of humanity—a position typical for ‘orthodox’ actors, ‘reformists’ and Theosophists alike—and nationalistic as well as exclusivist tendencies claiming, for instance, the authority of what was presented as the Vedic Brahmanical tradition.

These debates about the origin, meaning and future of ‘dharma’ and ‘religion’ may be considered very modern, not least because they were largely informed or motivated by the emergence of critical philological scholarship since the late eighteenth century. The discussants explicitly referred to the dawning of a ‘new age,’ differentiating between something ‘old’ and something ‘new,’ or ‘ancient’ and ‘modern.’²⁸ From the perspective of global religious history, the crucial point is that this heterogeneous and disputed sense of ‘modernity’ was always subject to reinterpretation and negotiation.

Competing understandings of ‘science’ played a key role in this process. As Gyan Prakash has argued, modern Indian identity has been significantly constituted by ‘science’s cultural authority as the legitimating sign of rationality and progress,’ which was perceived as part of the colonial

²⁶Viswanathan, ‘The Ordinary Business of Occultism’, *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (2000); Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 177–207. For a more detailed treatment of this issue, see Julian Strube, ‘Theosophy, Race, and the Study of Esotericism’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 4 (2022).

²⁷Hatcher, Brian A. ‘Great Men Waking: Paradigms in the History of the Historiography of the Bengal Renaissance.’ In *Bengal: Rethinking History: Essays in Historiography*, edited by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 135–63. New Delhi: Manohar, 2001; Raychaudhuri, Tapan. *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal*. Delhi/New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 336–8; Sen, Amiya P. *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal, 1872–1905: Some Essays in Interpretation*. Oxford/Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, 10.

²⁸Cf. Milinda Banerjee, ‘“All This is Indeed Brahman”: Rammohun Roy and a “Global” History of the Rights-Bearing Self’, *Asian Review of World Histories* 3, no. 1 (2015): 95–96.

‘civilizing mission.’²⁹ This supposed ‘liberation’ from superstition, irrationalism and backwardness, however, was ‘a profoundly contradictory enterprise’ that impelled Western-educated Indians to reinterpret pre-colonial traditions and cast them in the language of the Western scientific discourse. Nationalism arose through claims to the revival of ancient scientific traditions as the heritage of the nation: ‘To be a nation was to be endowed with science, which had become the touchstone of rationality.’³⁰ In his analysis of P.C. Ray’s famous *History of Hindu Chemistry* (1902), Pratik Chakrabarti has shown how references to ancient India served as an authority to counter the hegemony of ‘modern Western science’ in a move that bolstered national confidence and inspired anti-colonial sentiment: in this case, by Ray’s insistence on a ‘materialist scientific’ Indian past.³¹ Invocations of nationalism and science, then, were closely interlinked, but their meanings and constellation diverged in different historical sources and their contexts. The studies by Projit Bihari Mukharji, for instance, have shone light on how learned Bengalis, particularly from the Brahmo milieu, have attempted to reconcile ‘scientific rationality’ with a belief in ‘something more than science,’ a ‘marriage of medical science and religion’ that is best approached through a relational, decentred historiography.³² Famous figures such as Vivekananda have called upon ‘science’ as a legitimation for their ‘spiritual’ teachings, asserting the superiority of Hinduism over a one-sided, impoverished materialistic West.³³ Science could be positioned very differently towards religion or ‘spirituality,’ but its major role in nationalist, anti-colonial discourse revolving around (pristine) tradition and (colonial) modernity is beyond question.

Relating local contexts (for instance, of Sanskrit Brahmanical education) to global debates about religion and science raise the issue of diachronic perspectives on pre-colonial developments. The question of *when* we can speak of global connections is controversially discussed among global historians, not least because of their prevalent focus on the modern period.³⁴ A widespread view is that ‘global connections are preceded by conditions and that it is essential to thoroughly understand these conditions before [scholars] can hope to understand the connections themselves. Exchange, in other words, may be a surface phenomenon that gives evidence of the basic structural transformations that made the exchange possible in the first place.’³⁵ Grasping these transformations in the case of India requires careful historical contextualization and consideration of the fact that, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam has remarked about the precolonial period, Europeans ‘conceived India not in some purely predetermined terms, but through their dealings with local interlocutors.’³⁶ During the nineteenth century, such interactions were increasingly determined by local conflicts between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ standpoints.

Brian Hatcher, a leading expert on ‘modern reform’ movements, has recently argued that we should think of ‘modern Hinduism as emerging—rather than divorcing itself—from premodern modes of innovation.’³⁷ Instead of viewing the language of revival in terms of a break with the past

²⁹Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3–7.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 6–7.

³¹Pratik Chakrabarty, ‘Science, Nationalism, and Colonial Contestations: P.C. Ray and his Hindu Chemistry’, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 37, no. 2 (2000): 186–87.

³²Projit Bihari Mukharji, *Nationalizing the Body: The Medical Market, Print and Dakari Medicine* (London/New York: Anthem Press, 2009), 52–53. Also see *Doctoring Traditions: Ayurveda, Small Technologies, and Braided Sciences* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), esp. 20–27.

³³Mukharji, *Nationalizing*, 162; also see C. Mackenzie Brown, ‘Vivekananda and the Scientific Legitimation of Advaita Vedānta’, in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, ed. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010).

³⁴Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, ‘Approaches to Global Intellectual History’, in *Global Intellectual History*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 15, 20; Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 265–70.

³⁵Conrad, *Global History*, 69–70.

³⁶Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Europe’s India: Words, People, Empires, 1500–1800* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2017), 212.

³⁷Brian A. Hatcher, *Hinduism Before Reform* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2020), 32.

or the dawning of a new age, it is necessary to consider the early colonial period from roughly 1750 to 1850 as a ‘crucial moment of transition.’³⁸ I strongly affirm the necessity to diachronically relate the colonial to the pre-colonial period. However, as Michael Bergunder has cautioned, ‘precolonial’ can only denote the time directly before the nineteenth century, rather than vaguely alluding to Indian traditions, the continuity of which over millennia is often simply presupposed.³⁹ Here, Shivachandra and his affiliates form an instructive nodal point between the traditions of Brahmanical learning in Bengal and the period of British colonialism. As Abhishek Ghosh has argued with regard to the complicated relationship between Bengali Vaishnavism, nineteenth-century ‘reform’ movements such as the Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj, and Tantric practices, negotiations of ‘modern Hinduism’ must be viewed against the diachronic background of pre-colonial developments and factional polemics.⁴⁰

This directly relates to the idea of ‘traditional Indian culture’ contrasted with ‘modern’ developments. Some scholars, such as Andrew Nicholson, reject the juxtaposition of ‘traditional Hinduism’ with ‘Neo-Hinduism,’ emphasizing instead the ‘ruptures and continuities’ in Indian history.⁴¹ Yet, such distinctions sometimes still structure scholarship on Hinduism even if they are explicitly addressed. A historiographical focus on Western-educated ‘modern’ elites not only obfuscate vast parts of Brahmanical Sanskritic learning but also an enormous variety of subaltern contexts. An exclusive emphasis on such élites bears the danger of painting, in the words of Ferdinando Sardella and Lucian Wong, ‘a dramatically impoverished picture of the colonial Hindu landscape.’⁴² Yet, it is equally important not to drive a categorical wedge between ‘Western-educated modernists’ and their ‘traditional’ counterpart. As the example of Shivachandra and his affiliates shows, such a strict separation would be highly misleading. Richard Weiss has recently argued that a dichotomy between tradition and modernity tends to ‘reinforce dichotomies between Western modernity and Indian tradition, emphasizing the role of the West in Hindu innovation, and consigning expressions of Hinduism that were largely untouched by Western ideas to the realm of static tradition.’⁴³ Focusing on the Brahma Samaj and its relationship with Bengali Vaishnavism, Ankur Barua has similarly complicated the binaries of modernity and tradition, reform and revival.⁴⁴ Indeed, equating ‘Western’ or ‘Westernized’ with ‘modern’ would perpetuate Eurocentric diffusionist models of modernity and cement a neglect of local contexts and non-Anglophone sources.

Not least because of its obviously conflictual nature, the emergence of modernity should not be regarded as a process of homogenization. This is an important aspect, as global historians are frequently accused of an overemphasis of similarities and convergences, resulting not only in the superficial talk of ubiquitous connections and globality, but also in narratives of global homogenization.⁴⁵ It is, in fact, necessary to ‘problematize the category of the ‘global’ as already inflected

³⁸*Ibid.*, 33–41.

³⁹Michael Bergunder, ‘Hinduism, Theosophy, and the Bhagavad Gita within a Global Religious History of the Nineteenth Century’, in *Theosophy Across Boundaries: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement*, ed. Hans Martin Krämer and Julian Strube (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 88–89.

⁴⁰Abhishek Ghosh, ‘Innate Intuition: An Intellectual History of Sahajajñāna and Sahaja Samādhi in Brahmoism and Modern Vaiṣṇavism’, *Religions* 10, no. 6 (2019): 3–7; also see Lucian Wong, ‘Against Vaiṣṇava Deviance: Brāhmanical and Bhadrakok Alliance in Bengal’, *Religions* 9, no. 2 (2018).

⁴¹Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 19–20.

⁴²Lucian Wong and Ferdinando Sardella, ‘Vaiṣṇavism in Colonial Bengal: Beyond the Hindu Renaissance’, in *The Legacy of Vaiṣṇavism in Colonial Bengal*, ed. Ferdinando Sardella and Lucian Wong (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 5–6.

⁴³Richard S. Weiss, *The Emergence of Modern Hinduism: Religion on the Margins of Colonialism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 1–2.

⁴⁴Ankur Barua, *The Brahma Samaj and its Vaiṣṇava Milieus: Intersections of Hindu Knowledge and Love in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021), xi–xxi.

⁴⁵Richard Drayton and David Motadel, ‘Discussion: The Futures of Global History’, *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 1 (2018): 7–13; cf. Kris Manjappa, ‘Transnational Approaches to Global History: A View From the Study of German-Indian Entanglement’, *German History* 32 (2014).

by latent universalistic assumptions which need to be confessed rather than simply wished away.⁴⁶ The genealogical method of global religious history is well equipped to meet this historiographical challenge, as the examples provided in this paper will exemplify the historical tensions between universalistic, nationalistic and factionalist tendencies.

Orthodox Sabhās and Shivachandra Vidyarnava

In order to shed light on such tensions and to understand Shivachandra's claim to 'orthodoxy,' it is essential to consider the emergence of conservative societies (*sabhās*) which propagated specific understandings of *dharma* since the 1880s. Their investigation is not least difficult because they can hardly be situated on a neat modernity/tradition or reform/revival axis. This is further complicated by the sheer heterogeneity of such groups, not least with respect to the role and status of the Tantras, as opposed to the Vedas and other corpora, such as the Puranas. Their proponents professed to defend *sanātana dharma* against both Western influences and Indian reformers (allegedly corrupted by said influences). The leading figures in the organization of 'Hindu orthodoxy' in late nineteenth-century Bengal were the English-educated Krishnaprasanna Sen (1849–1902) and Shashadhar Tarkachuramani (1851–1928), a pandit with a Sanskrit education. Born in Navadvip, Krishnaprasanna gained knowledge of Christianity in the company of missionaries.⁴⁷ In the late 1870s, he began to agitate against what he considered Westernized, materialist culture. In 1880, he founded the Indian Society for the Propagation of Aryan Dharma (Bhāratbarṣīya Ārya Dharma Pracārīṇī Sabhā, BADPS), which proclaimed to 'propagate Sanatan Hinduism as manifest in the sacred Vedas and thus to encourage the salvation of the common man,' as well as to further 'the study and propagation of the Aryan religion and culture.' The society was 'dedicated to the revival of Aryan religion as expounded in the *Vedas, Tantras* and *Puranas*.'⁴⁸

In 1900, numerous 'orthodox' societies were unified under the Bhārat Dharma Mahāmaṇḍal (BDM), which had convened in Delhi under the presidency of the maharaja of Darbhanga, Rameshwar Singh (1860–1929), who had also been a donor of the BADPS.⁴⁹ The BDM set up 600 branches, was affiliated with 400 institutions, and employed nearly 200 preachers. Yet, it remained a markedly elitist organization funded by princes and other members of the social élite, and whose agents were pandits rather than common people. Neither was it a uniform body professing a monolithic *sanātana dharma*. Contemporaries criticized internal contradictions, for instance, that *sanātana dharma* was presented as caste-based, traditional Hinduism, while it was also declared in the first issue of the *Mahāmaṇḍal Magazine* 'the universal Dharma for all mankind.' The society was not even opposed to the notion of reform, as it announced its aim to 'promote Hindu religious education in accordance with the Sanatan Dharma, to diffuse the knowledge of the Vedas, Smrtis, Purans and other Hindu Shastras and to introduce, in the light of such knowledge, useful reforms into Hindu Life and Society.'⁵⁰

Such ambiguities are also characteristic of Shivachandra, who was a most vocal proponent of *sanātana dharma* and denounced its degeneration through foreign influences, while also accepting Woodroffe as his disciple and supporting the translation and publication of his *Tantratattva* (1893) as *Principles of Tantra* (1914/16). Despite claiming an 'orthodoxy' that most would have associated with Brahmanical exclusivity, a rigid caste order and the drawing of boundaries between 'Hindus' and 'non-Hindus,' Shivachandra made clear his disagreement with traditionalist notions of caste hierarchies and his wish for the establishment of religious unity.⁵¹ While his

⁴⁶Banerjee, 'All This is Indeed Brahman', 83.

⁴⁷Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal, 1872–1905: Some Essays in Interpretation* (Oxford/Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 219–20.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 222, 431–32.

⁴⁹John Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India* (New Delhi/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 50–54.

⁵⁰John Nicol Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1929), 317.

⁵¹Cf. Basantakumār Pāl, *Tantrācārya Śīb'candra Bīdyārṇab* (Kuc'bihār: Tribṛtta Prakāśanī, 1972), 206–7.

writings (which he notably penned in Bengali, rather than Sanskrit⁵²) do display an expertise in the authoritative Sanskrit scriptures (*śāstras*), his ideas were also significantly shaped by the Shakta poetry tradition of Bengal, contemporary popular movements and the encounter with colonial education.

That Shivachandra propagated Tantra as the true core of the Aryan *sanātana dharma* might appear odd, considering that Tantra was regarded as the worst symptom of an alleged degeneration of Indian culture, not only by missionaries and orientalists, but also by Indian ‘reformers’ such as Dayananda Saraswati and his Arya Samaj.⁵³ Shivachandra’s stance becomes plausible when viewed against the deeper diachronic background of Bengali culture and its centers of learning, Navadvip and Krishnagar.⁵⁴ It is significant that Bengal lay, according to various classical Indian sources, beyond the region called *āryāvarta* and hence of what was regarded as Aryan Brahmanical culture. The diffusion of Brahmanical culture in that region can only be attested from the Gupta period in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁵⁵ The period from the sixth century to the establishment of the first South Asian sultanates in the thirteenth century coincides with an increasing dominance of Tantric traditions in the region.⁵⁶ As a consequence, the Tantras have been incorporated into the Brahmanical study of dharma (*dharmaśāstra*) and the learned interpretation of the Vedas (*smṛti*). This prompted the propagation of Shaiva-Shakta traditions at the Krishnagar court of Krishnachandra Ray, one of six *zamindars* (landlords) who had received new political freedoms since the takeover of the Mughal ruler Alivardi Khan in 1740. The resulting focus on goddess worship and Shakta traditions, which contrasted with developments in other parts of India, explains the present-day prominence of festivals like Durga Puja and the role of the Goddess Kali as Bengal’s patron deity. These Shakta traditions were embraced by the English-educated middle class known as *bhadralok* and became ‘inextricably embedded in the idea of Bengali culture.’⁵⁷ In Bengal, Tantric rites were not ‘stigmatized or hidden’ but ‘normative,’ similar to Shaiva Siddhanta and Shri Vidya in the South of India.⁵⁸

Navadvip emerged as a centre of Brahmanical learning since the seventeenth century, when India was in ‘intellectual overdrive.’⁵⁹ Not only was the city famous as the birthplace of Chaitanya, the great Vaishnava, but also for its scholars of New Logic (*navya nyāya*), *dharmaśāstra*, astronomy, Tantra and Vedanta.⁶⁰ This atmosphere first thrived under the sultanate of Husayn Shah and witnessed a second blossoming under the auspices of Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The final period of systematic patronage was marked by Brahmanical scholars who cooperated with the British from 1772 in the Anglo-Hindu legal system’s adaptation of *dharmaśāstra*.⁶¹ This so-called Oxford of Bengal was not an intellectually isolated sphere, neither with regard to ‘the West’ nor with regard to exchanges between Vaishnavas, Shaktas, Muslims and

⁵²The use of *prākṛta* languages such as Bengali was traditionally deemed inappropriate for learned discourse and often even vehemently rejected. See, e.g., Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

⁵³Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy Politics, and Power in the Study of Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1–72.

⁵⁴Strube, *Global Tantra*, 48–55.

⁵⁵Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Purāṇas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111–13.

⁵⁶Alexis Sanderson, ‘The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period’, in *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, ed. Shingo Einoo (University of Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, 2009).

⁵⁷Joel Bordeaux, ‘The Mythic King: Raja Krishnacandra and Early Modern Bengal’ (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 2015), 21.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 108.

⁵⁹Jonardon Ganeri, *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India, 1450–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13, 17.

⁶⁰Samita Sinha, *Pandits in a Changing Environment: Centres of Sanskrit Learning in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Calcutta: Sarat Book House, 1993), 15, 28.

⁶¹Ganeri, *Lost Age of Reason*, 39–59.

Christians. The end of the eighteenth century saw the rise of Shakta devotional poetry, which increasingly took a universalistic orientation, embracing Vaishnava and Muslim traditions.⁶² In the nineteenth century, this led to the emergence of the Bauls, whose most celebrated representative Lalou Fakir professed the ultimate unity of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and all creeds.⁶³

Growing up in that atmosphere, Shivachandra positioned himself mainly against the influence of English education and refused to learn the English language. He was born on May 16, 1860 (*jaishtha* 2, 1267) in the village of Kumarkhali, which today lies in the Kushtiya district in Bangladesh. The region stood out as an intellectual and cultural hotspot well into the twentieth century. Kumarkhali is close to Shilaidaha Kuthibari, the famous residence established by Dwarkanath and Debendranath Tagore, which was frequented by Rabindranath Tagore since the 1890s. Shivachandra's family had been living in Kumarkhali for a long time.⁶⁴ His lineage was one of the renowned Tantrics stretching over 11 generations. Shivachandra's father Chandrakumar was reportedly celebrated for his learning, often consulted by pandits and respected by Hindus and Muslims alike.

A common feature of the different accounts about Kumarkhali is the description of a setting where religious and social divisions were transgressed. The importance of this atmosphere for the interpretation of Tantra that was later propagated by Avalon is vital. In the second half of the nineteenth century, a personal network emerged at Kumarkhali and in neighbouring parts of the Nadiya region. One of the nodal points of that network was Kungal Majumdar, who became famous under the name Kungal Harinath. The writer and composer of Baul songs was born in Kumarkhali and created a group including a whole range of thinkers who were involved in contemporary religious and political debates. These included Shivachandra, whose family had close ties to Kungal.⁶⁵ Shivachandra remained closely associated with Kungal and was deeply influenced by his thought—he is said to have been his dearest disciple.⁶⁶

Kungal was a strong advocate of the poor and disadvantaged castes. He had first attended a local English school, which he had to leave because of his poverty. In 1855, he set up a Bengali school in his village, followed by a girls' school in the succeeding year. Beginning in 1863, he started publishing his journal, *Grāmbārtā Prakāśikā* (Village Publication),⁶⁷ whose reputed contributors included Rabindranath Tagore. The journal was financially supported by Rabindranath's sister Svarnakumari Devi, who, like many members of the Kolkata intelligentsia, would later join the Theosophical Society. In his own contributions, Kungal promoted vernacular education and levelled criticism against social oppression, denouncing, for instance, the exploitative machinations of British indigo farmers. Kungal also ran one of the gymnasias (*ākhṛā*) that were established across the country to invigorate India's youth and foster anti-colonial activity.

The Baul group established by Kungal at Kumarkhali in 1880 that was known as Phikir Cānder Dal. Among his disciples were Akshaykumar Maitra (1861–1930), who would later become a historian and the co-founder of the well-known Varendra Research Society; Mir Mosharrif Hossain (1847–1912), the first prominent Muslim author in Bengali whose work is still widely read and Dinendrakumar Ray (1869–1943), the novelist and future teacher of Aurobindo Ghosh.⁶⁸ Another disciple was Shivachandra's classmate Jaladhar Sen (1860–1939), Kungal's future biographer and a

⁶²Rachel Fell McDermott, *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kālī and Umā in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶³Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶⁴Pāl, *Tantrācārya*, 2–10; cf. Kāśināth Cāk'lādār, *Mahāsādhak tantrācārya Śiv'candra Bidyārṇab* (Kolkata: Pustaka Bipani, 2006), 17–23.

⁶⁵Jaladhar Sen, *Ātmajībanī o Smṛti-Tarpan* (Kolkata: Jijñāsā Ejensij, 1960), 150; cf. Pāl, *Tantrācārya*, 25; Cāk'lādār, *Mahāsādhak*, 69.

⁶⁶*Mahāsādhak*, 29–30.

⁶⁷Sen, *Ātmajībanī*, 75–78.

⁶⁸Pāl, *Tantrācārya*, 53; Cāk'lādār, *Mahāsādhak*, 29–30; cf. Sen, *Ātmajībanī*, 64–65, 85–98.

distinguished writer, whose numerous editorial activities included positions in the famous conservative *Baṅgabāsi* newspaper as well as the progressive *Indian Mirror*, led by the Brahmo-affiliated Narendranath Sen.⁶⁹ The group surrounding Kāngal connected Shivachandra to Lalon Fakir, whose unique thought combining Tantric, Vaishnava and Sufi elements, among others, is mainly known through the large number of his highly popular songs.⁷⁰

As mentioned above, Shivachandra's life was marked by the conflict between English and vernacular education. This is evidenced by Jaladhar, who had been Shivachandra's classmate in the Bengali school at Kumarkhali established by Kāngal. The boys had entered the school at four years old, but Shivachandra was taken out of it after only 2 years. According to Jaladhar, Shivachandra's father Chandrakumar, to whom he referred with the very intimate term *caṅdrakākā*, was an 'extremely spirited Brahmin' who took issue with the material taught at the school.⁷¹ One day, young Shivachandra was reportedly reading the *Caritābali*, a translation of the exemplary lives of learned or heroic Europeans that had been composed by the famous educationist and reformer, Ishvachandra Vidyasagar, on the basis of William Chamber's *Exemplary and Instructive Biography* (1836). The compilation contained the story of Valentine Duval (1695–1775), a French shepherd boy who, due to his diligence, became an eminent historian. Seeing that his boy was reading the story, Chandrakumar was outraged and decided that Shivachandra should from now on be homeschooled by his erudite grandfather Krishnashundar.

This reaction, whether historically accurate or not, reflects a far-reaching conflict over the material that was taught to children at school.⁷² Ishvachandra Vidyasagar had taken Chamber's stories about explorers, scientists and other virtuous men to replace vernacular school primers such as the *Śiśubodh*, which contained the life stories of Hindu gods. This replacement drew wide criticism by those who regarded it as a blatant recasting of Indian culture after a European model.⁷³ That Chandrakumar took his son out of school was therefore an act of defiance against what he perceived as a replacement of local culture with European learning. Subsequently, Shivachandra was sent to Navadvip, where he received instruction in a Vedic school (*catuṣpāthī*) and was educated in a Sanskrit school (*śol*). His understanding of Tantra was thus clearly shaped by local tradition at Nadiya and his education at Navadvip, which trained him in the 'Bengal School' approach to *dharmaśāstra*, the Tantras and Navya Nyāya.

In the 1890s, Shivachandra founded his own 'orthodox' society that opposed Western influence by invoking the Aryan *sanātana dharma*. This society was named Sarvamaṅgalā Sabhā, after Shivachandra's personal deity (*iṣṭadevī*), a manifestation of the Goddess. It was based in Kumarkhali and Benares, but several branches were formed throughout India. The Sarvamaṅgalā Sabhā announced his wish to cure 'the diseased body of the society' in a time of crisis. This was to be accomplished by two aims, in the words of one of Shivachandra's disciples: first, the *sabhā* professed the struggle against Western material science (*jaravijñān*) by promoting the 'eternal Vedic dharma' (*sanātana vaidik dharma*) and taking a stand against 'the propaganda of Western materialist capitalists' (*pāścātyer dhanatāntrikdiger annadāsakuler apapracār*). Second, it

⁶⁹Sen, *Hindu Revivalism*, 253; Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973), 255–56.

⁷⁰Carola Erika Lorea, "Playing the Football of Love on the Field of the Body": The Contemporary Repertoire of Baul Songs', *Religion and the Arts* 17, no. 4 (2013): 426–27.

⁷¹Sen, *Ātmajībanī*, 151–52.

⁷²Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal (1848–85)* (New Delhi/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Papia Sengupta, *Pedagogy for Religion: Missionary Education and the Fashioning of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); *Language as Identity in Colonial India: Policies and Politics* (New York: Springer, 2017).

⁷³Nandini Bhattacharya, 'Anglicized–Sanskritized–Vernacularized: Translational Politics of Primer Writing in Colonial Bengal', in *Language Policy and Education in India: Documents, Contexts and Debates* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2017), 167–68; Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi/New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 254; cf. Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 7–8, 45–67.

should overcome the divisions between Shakta and Vaishnava factions and establish religious and social unity between them.⁷⁴ These goals express the idea of a shared core of *dharma* linked to Bengali tradition and opposed to Western science; they also highlight an awareness of the dynamics between capitalism, materialism, and colonialism that shaped intellectual production in Bengal.⁷⁵

The founding members of the Sarvamaṅgalā Sabhā consisted of a range of prominent and remarkably diverse figures, among them the aforementioned conservative pandit, Shashadhar Tarkachuramani. We also find the renowned Vedanta pandit Kalibar Vedantabagish, who would later, by recommendation of Shashadhar, become the teacher of Swami Abhedananda of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, who maintained close links to Theosophy and Spiritualism.⁷⁶ It is perhaps most remarkable to encounter Bijaykrishna Goswami (1841–1899), a famous and highly influential Vaishnava reformer who had earlier been a follower of the ‘reformist’ Brahma Samaj.⁷⁷ This further underlines the blurriness of distinctions between reformist and revivalist factions.

Shivachandra propagated his understanding of Tantra in public speeches, songs and a considerable number of writings. Besides Bengali and Sanskrit, he spoke Hindi and was widely known for his overwhelming oratory skills and his ability to captivate audiences, both learned and popular.⁷⁸ The power of his language is palpable in his publications, which included a range of books published in the 1890s.⁷⁹ *Tantratattva* was probably one of the first of these texts, as its preface was written in Benares in February or March 1890, although the first print edition appears to have been published several years later, in 1893, under the auspices of the Sarvamaṅgalā Sabhā.

It does not come as a surprise that Shivachandra, his associates and his disciples became ardent promoters of the anti-colonial Swadeshi movement. The guru is known to have given several public speeches in support of it. One of these was held at the Kushtiya Swadeshi conference in 1905. Its participants included the famous Swadeshi leader, Surendranath Bandyopadhyay, as well as Ambika Majumdar, the later president of the Indian National Congress, Jaladhar Sen and Akshaykumar Maitra.⁸⁰ Shivachandra enthralled the audience by speaking in a simple yet powerful Bengali, unlike Surendranath, who was known for delivering his speeches in English, like most contemporary orators.⁸¹ Giving a speech in Bengali was a political statement in itself, and it did not fail to resonate strongly with the popular audience, which often had problems listening to English.

Shivachandra wore the attire of a Tantric pandit when he appeared on the stage, which made an even stronger impression than his use of Bengali. By appearing as a *sādhaka*, a devoted religious practitioner, Shivachandra appealed to widespread associations between Goddess-centered Shaktism and nationalism.⁸² Adorned with a bloodred sandalwood tilak on his forehead, a

⁷⁴Pal, *Tantrācārya*, 146.

⁷⁵This aspect has been investigated in detail by Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), e.g., 5–6, 129. Andrew Liu has recently underlined how capitalist competition and imperialist propaganda were inherently intertwined with culturalist notions of static civilizational and natural traits; see Andrew B. Liu, *Tea War: A History of Capitalism in China and India* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2020), 3–8.

⁷⁶Moni Bagchi, *Swami Abhedananda: A Spiritual Biography*, 3rd ed. (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 2018), 52; Phanindranath Bose, *Life of Sris Chandra Basu* (R. Chatterjee, 1932), 164.

⁷⁷Bipin Chandra Pal, *Saint Bijaykrishna Goswami* (Calcutta: Bipinchandra Pal Institute, 1964); Gaṅgeś'candra Cakrabartī, *Bāmlār Sādhak*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Sadgrantha Prakāśan, 1927), 118–51; David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 219–27.

⁷⁸Pal, *Tantrācārya*, 225 and Caklādār, *Mahāsādhak*, 57.

⁷⁹Pal, *Tantrācārya*, 72; cf. Subodhchandra Sengupta, ed. *Sangsad Bāñālī Caritābhidhān* (Calcutta: Sahitya Sangsad, 1976), 512.

⁸⁰Pal, *Tantrācārya*, 77–78; cf. Caklādār, *Mahāsādhak*, 15.

⁸¹Sarkar, *Swadeshi*, 276, 80.

⁸²Urban, *Tantra*, 73–105.

necklace of rudraksha beads, and an ochre robe, Shivachandra raised his voice and, typically for his oratory style, performed a play of words that referred to the different forms of the Mother goddess as an earthen image, as the soil of the land and as the Mother of all and everything (*māṭi* and *mā-ti*).⁸³ This idea was also expressed in several of Shivachandra's popular songs, which praised the Mother as the nurturer of the land and its children, voiced criticism of colonial oppression, and stressed the fact that one's duty towards the Mother equaled one's duty towards the homeland.⁸⁴

Shivachandra emphatically expressed his conviction that, as soon as the knowledge handed down from guru to disciple in secret (*nigūṛh bhābe*) over the centuries would become widely known, the regeneration of a world ravaged by modernity would be at hand.⁸⁵ Shivachandra regarded the corruption of Indian culture by ignorance and foreign domination as the main threat to this revival of *sanātana dharma*. It is therefore not surprising to find his contributions in conservative newspapers such as the *Baṅgabāsi* and Shashadhar's *Bed'byās*. In the 1890s, he also edited an own monthly journal named *Śaibī*. Unlike other ostensibly 'orthodox' pandits, Shivachandra also appealed to a wider unlearned public with his devotional songs to the Goddess (*śyāmā saṅgīt*). A number of these songs, which followed the tradition of Ramprasad Sen and the contemporary Baul circle at Kumarkhali, were collected in a volume with the noteworthy title *Gītāñjali* (like Rabindranath's later work, which earned him the Nobel Prize). Evidently, Shivachandra was deeply involved, not only in highly educated discussions with pandits, but also in the popularizing devotional movement that nurtured national sentiment.

Pramathanath Mukhopadhyay and 'National education'

In *Tantratattva*, Shivachandra frequently voiced his disdain for the Indian 'young men puffed up with their Western education [*pāścātyabidyābhimane sphītbaṅṣā*], but destitute of real worth, aimless and extremely lazy.'⁸⁶ In his and other 'orthodox' polemics, Indian learning was often contrasted with an allegedly superficial and destructive Western science, which at the same functioned as a constant marker of reference and authority: the superiority of ancient Indian teachings was often established by the claim that modern Western science was only rediscovering the wisdom of the Rishis (the Vedic sages). The central role of science and education for the Tantric nationalism espoused by the members of the Sarvamaṅgalā Sabhā is vital for an understanding of the writings of an influential disciple of Shivachandra: Pramathanath Mukhopadhyay, who was among Woodroffe's main collaborators and was also connected to Swami Abhedananda and then Swami Prajnanananda, the editor of later Bengali editions of *Tantratattva*.⁸⁷

Pramathanath was born in Chanduli in the district of Burdwan, about 40 kilometres northwest of Navadvip. As indicated earlier, his philosophy took shape within a highly political context marked by anti-colonial nationalism. Like many other authors, including Shashadhar, Pramathanath was convinced that the doctrines of the ancient Rishis were confirmed by modern science and philosophy.⁸⁸ He dedicated most of his work to an understanding of mantras and yantras, as expounded by the Tantras.⁸⁹ As he wrote towards the end of his life, 'Tantra in its extended sense is the science (one may call it 'esoteric' when it ventures beyond the empirical) as well as the art of realization.'⁹⁰ This realization should be achieved through *sādhana*, ritual

⁸³Pāl, *Tantrācārya*, 76.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 107–15, 44–46, 200–01; Cāk'lādār, *Mahāsādhak*, 88.

⁸⁵Śib'candra Bhaṭṭācāryya Bidyārṇab, *Gaṅgeś* (Calcutta: Dānbāri Gaṅgopādhyāy, 1898), 154–63.

⁸⁶*Tantratattva*, 2 ed. (Calcutta: Nababhārat Pābliśārs, 1982), 357.

⁸⁷Strube, *Global Tantra*, 187–212.

⁸⁸Pratyagatmananda Saraswati, *Complete Works*, 1, 7–8.

⁸⁹Swami Pratyagatmananda Saraswati and John Woodroffe, *Sadhana for Self-Realization (Mantras, Yantras & Tantras)* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1963), 1–26.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 23.

practice, which enabled the practitioner to turn shakti, the energetic manifestation of the Goddess, into an ‘operating energy’ that could be harnessed and directed through mantras. The most extensive discussion of this philosophy is contained in Pramathanath’s six-volume magnum opus, *Japasūtram*.⁹¹ Pramathanath later took on the name of Swami Pratyagatmananda Saraswati and continued to write works about Tantra and science, revolving around *sādhana*.⁹² This would deserve a study in its own right, as Pramathanath has been rightly termed one of ‘the most intriguing and prolific’ writers explaining mantric utterance to a twentieth-century Indian audience.⁹³

Pramathanath’s engagement with Western philosophy and science was deep and ingenuous, creating a unique system of thought. Andrew Sartori has pointed out that he elaborated Shivachandra’s qualified non-dualism (typical for this variety of Shakta Tantra) through the lens of German philosophical Idealism, especially Hegel. Pramathanath claimed that modern Idealism was approaching the truths discovered by the ancient Aryans, effectively turning around the claim of scholars such as Friedrich Max Müller that Idealism embodied the virile and mature stage of Aryan thought.⁹⁴ In his work *India: Her Cult and Education* from 1912, Pramathanath described his vision that Hindu society was approaching ‘complete self-fulfillment’ whose prerequisite was the strengthening of ‘the strategic points of his social constitution,’ so that ‘the necessity for adaptation’ to outside influences would eventually be outgrown.

Eventually, the role of ‘the Hindu’ in this world-historical scheme was that of the ‘God-appointed High-priest’ before ‘the altar of Humanity.’ Of course, in order to create the prerequisites for this development, Hindu society would first have to realize its self-fulfillment. Philosophy, as understood by Pramathanath, was the central force behind that realization, providing ‘a definite conception of what life in its individual and collective aspects ought to be, a distinct notion of the nature and conditions of life’s self-fulfillment.’⁹⁵ This would provide the framework for a ‘scheme of national education of India,’ animated by ‘patriotic devotion.’⁹⁶

The key to this would be a comprehension of the particularities of the Indians (which Pramathanath effectively equalled with Hindus). On one hand, ‘human psychology is practically the same in its essential features all over the world and throughout history,’ and all was derived from the ‘primordial motherstuff of social life.’ On the other, races developed differently as they were subjected to the influences of ‘Nature.’ As Pramathanath explains with references to Darwin, Spencer and Huxley, the ‘Indo-European families of the Aryan stock’ have therefore evolved into different branches.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, they still shared the same foundations of the ‘philosophical method’ required for the advancement of humanity: ‘India was undoubtedly the home of noble systems of philosophy, but so was also Greece and so has also been Germany.’ These systems were superior because they had been created by ‘a race that *lives* philosophy and not simply *produces* it.’⁹⁸ It was thus vital for a ‘social mind’ to ‘know its own constitution thoroughly and make the knowledge a source of power and an instrument for doing good,’ in order to move towards self-fulfillment.⁹⁹

Pramathanath, then, strived for a comprehension of Indian history to facilitate India’s self-realization. From his viewpoint, the first and foremost source for this analysis were the *sadhus*, ‘the apostles and professors of realistic mysticism.’ Those were the privileged interpreters of Hindu civilization, ‘for whatever Hinduism may be, it is pre-eminently *a cult of experimental realization*,

⁹¹Swami Pratyagatmananda Saraswati, *Japasūtram: The Science of Creative Sound* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1971).

⁹²*Science and Sādhanā* (Calcutta: Sm. Sudha Basu, 1962).

⁹³Harvey P. Alper, *Understanding Mantras* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 442.

⁹⁴Andrew Sartori, ‘Beyond Culture-Contact and Colonial Discourse: “Germanism” in Colonial Bengal’, *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 1 (2007): 87–88.

⁹⁵Pratyagatmananda Saraswati, *Complete Works*, 1, 1.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 4–6.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 10–18.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 18., original emphasis.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 30.

its basis being not dubious dialectics or mere theoretical assent playing fast and loose itself, but actual living experience, *not hypothesis but experiment*.¹⁰⁰ Other sources included the literature and tradition growing out of the Vedas; the lived lives of the millions of average people; the research of orientalist scholars and, as we shall see, contemporary intellectual currents.¹⁰¹

On these grounds, Pramathanath presented a philosophical system that, following Shivachandra, elevated experience and practice over abstraction and theorization. Tantric philosophy, supposedly like all true Aryan philosophy, was lived and applied in the real, actual world. Pramathanath explained the concrete outcomes of *sādhana* by contemporary evolutionary and racial theories in the vein of Darwin, Spencer or Huxley. Interestingly, this appreciation also included explicit references to Spiritualism and the ‘occult and unseen,’ as it proclaimed a synthesis of Western science and yoga.¹⁰² Pramathanath envisioned this future synthesis as a ‘progressive restoration’ of Aryan civilization as the foundation for a future Hindu society that would lead India to independence and appoint it the leader of humanity, for which ‘national education’ was the prerequisite. This line of thinking is representative of contemporary Bengali thinkers such as Aurobindo Ghosh—one of Pramathanath’s colleagues at the National Council of Education—or Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who similarly elaborated what Milinda Banerjee termed an ‘Indian nationalist theology of law’ that claimed ancient Indian roots of modern scientific concepts of natural law.¹⁰³ These sources contradict the idea that ‘non-Western’ authors merely reproduced (scientific) conceptual frameworks, demonstrating instead how semantic equivalences and competing historical narratives were forged against the background of local traditions.¹⁰⁴

Global entanglements: Theosophy and *The World as Power*

It has become clear by now that neither Shivachandra nor his affiliates and disciples inhabited a clearly demarcated cultural sphere but that their ideas and agendas were conditioned by local dynamics shaped by global exchanges. The ubiquitous language of ‘secret’ or ‘esoteric doctrines,’ as well as ‘occult’ forces and traditions that we have observed in the above sources points at the subject of ‘esotericism,’ which was inexorably intertwined with nineteenth-century debates about the meaning of religion, specifically with respect to its relation to science.¹⁰⁵ How important it is to relate local and global contexts in an investigation of these developments can be forcefully demonstrated by the Theosophical Society and its involvement in both Hindu revivalism and reform.¹⁰⁶ In fact, the notion of science was so central to Theosophical understandings of religion that Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), one of the Society’s founders and towering figures, proclaimed a ‘synthesis of religion, science, and philosophy’ as her final goal, while her co-founder Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) praised the ancient Aryan ‘Yoga Vidya’ as the ‘scientific basis of religion’ in accordance with Theosophy.¹⁰⁷ Meera Nanda has identified Theosophy at the root of the present-day view that Hinduism is the universal religion of the modern world because it is most compatible with the methods and findings of modern science; although Nanda specifies that

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰²For a discussion of other similar references to Darwin, Lamarck, Spencer and Theosophy, see C. Mackenzie Brown, *Hindu Perspectives on Evolution: Darwin, Dharma, and Design* (London/New York: Routledge, 2012), 77–78.

¹⁰³Milinda Banerjee, ‘Sovereignty as a Motor of Global Conceptual Travel: Sanskritic Equivalences of “Law” in Bengali Discursive Production’, *Modern Intellectual History* 17, no. 2 (2018): 6–8.

¹⁰⁴Cf. *ibid.* 5.

¹⁰⁵Bergunder, ‘Umkämpfte Historisierung’, 103–25.

¹⁰⁶For an overview of Theosophy from a global perspective, see the contributions to Krämer and Strube, *Theosophy Across Boundaries*.

¹⁰⁷This is extensively discussed in Strube, *Global Tantra*, 69–123. For a more general analysis, see Egil Asprem, ‘Theosophical Attitudes towards Science: Past and Present’, in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

Theosophy was the product of cultural exchange wherein such notions had already been present.¹⁰⁸ In any case, it is safe to affirm, with C. Mackenzie Brown, the often anti-colonial assimilation and adaptation of various Theosophical motifs and Theosophy's fundamental ideal of a scientific and scientized religion within Hindu discourse around 1900.¹⁰⁹ In what follows, I will illustrate these dynamics with a focus on the reform versus revival debate.

One of the most influential religious movements of that period, the Theosophical Society had been founded in New York in 1875 in a Spiritualist environment and relocated its headquarters to India in 1879 in search for the ancient 'Aryan' wisdom supposedly at the root of universal Truth.¹¹⁰ The Society's entanglement with 'Brahmanical orthodoxy' and 'Hindu revivalism,' but also with 'reform,' is an instructive case in point for the importance of global connections in struggles about 'true' religion. Not only was Theosophy one of the major agents in religious exchange on a global scale, but it also significantly inspired actors such as Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi and developed into a major cultural-political force in India, with its president Annie Besant elected as the president of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1917.¹¹¹ Indeed, the Congress had been founded by Allan Octavian Hume (1829–1912), who had joined the Theosophical Society already in 1881. These ties between Theosophy and the INC are well known but would deserve a more detailed dedicated study.¹¹²

In May 1877, the Theosophists entered a short-lived alliance with Dayananda Saraswati and renamed their society to 'The Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj of India.' Later, we encounter none other than Olcott among the founders of the Bhārat Dharma Mahāmaṇḍal.¹¹³ Rameshwar Singh, its patron and general secretary, was an eager supporter of the Theosophists and co-founded, with Besant, the Banaras Hindu University in 1911. Shivachandra, too, appears to have attracted the attention of the maharaja, who is said to have become one of his disciples and patronized the publication of Shivachandra's writings.¹¹⁴ Rameshwar's elder brother and predecessor, Lakshmeshwar Singh, had joined the Society in 1883 and was a generous supporter of the Theosophical Kashi Tattva Lodge in Benares—whose reports were printed, indeed, by Shashadhar Tarkachuramani's Vedavyasa Press.

It does not come as a surprise, then, that contemporaries situated Theosophy in the Hindu revivalist camp, although the Society, too, propagated strongly reformist agendas (such as female rights and education). Rather than an 'influence' of 'Western esotericism,' Theosophy became enmeshed in and was shaped by the debates that have so far been outlined. This might be illustrated by the title of the Bengali Theosophical Society, which was dedicated to 'the Promotion of the Meaning of the Eternal Aryan Dharma' (*sanātan āryyadharmmapracārtha baṅgadeśīya tattvasabhā*) and proclaimed *brahmavidyā* (a frequent translation of 'Theosophy') in terms that,

¹⁰⁸Meera Nanda, 'Madame Blavatsky's Children', in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, ed. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 280, 84–85. Although Nanda's argument is an important one, I disagree with her dialectical binary model of Eastern and Western (esoteric) tradition. I elaborate the reasons in Strube, *Global Tantra*, 7–8, 21–33 and 'Towards.'

¹⁰⁹Brown, *Hindu Perspectives*, 9–10.

¹¹⁰Rather than signifying the philosophical counterpart to materialism, Spiritualism here denotes the movement claiming to establish contact with the world of the departed. Growing out of several currents since the eighteenth century, it emerged as a hugely popular trend in the middle of the nineteenth century.

¹¹¹Julian Strube, 'Yoga and Meditation in Esoteric Traditions', in *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*, ed. Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); 'Hinduism, Western Esotericism, and New Age Religion in Europe', in *Handbook of Hinduism in Europe*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen and Ferdinando Sardella (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Strube, *Global Tantra*, 69–95.

¹¹²See Mark Bevir, 'Theosophy and the Origins of the Indian National Congress', *International Journal for Hindu Studies* 7, no. 1/3 (2003) and 'Theosophy as a Political Movement', in *Gurus and Their Followers*, ed. Antony Copley (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹¹³Veer, *Imperial Encounters*, 57.

¹¹⁴Cāk'lādār, *Mahāsādhak*, 70, 87.

not unlike Shivachandra and other 'orthodox' pandits, revolved around the revival of Aryan civilization to meet the ailments of a corrupted modern age.

The Avalon project was closely linked to the Theosophical Society. Most books published under the names of Avalon and Woodroffe were printed by the Theosophical publisher Ganesh & Co. in Madras. John Woodroffe's wife, Ellen, was a member of the Society and the couple was well acquainted with Annie Besant. John was also related to Hume, the Theosophist and founder of the Congress Party. Moreover, John published in Theosophical journals and gave lectures to Theosophists, while being highly critical of Theosophical viewpoints on Indian teachings. References to things 'occult' and 'esoteric' featured in both his own and in Pramathanath's writings, as well as in those of other disciples of Shivachandra.¹¹⁵ The crucial point is that this was not simply a 'Western influence' but the outcome of complex exchanges that unfolded against the diachronic background of Tantra in Bengal, the manifold connections that had shaped that background and the context of nineteenth-century colonialism.

This becomes specifically clear in light of the merging of 'Western science,' esotericism and Shakta philosophy in the work of Pramathanath and his propagation of 'national education.' His close and productive relationship with Woodroffe is another case in point. Woodroffe adopted Pramathanath's key arguments and co-authored a whole series of books with him, titled *The World as Power* (1922–1929). Not all volumes are officially co-authored, but Pramathanath's contribution is evident already in the first volume.¹¹⁶ Woodroffe frequently referred to Pramathanath as a friend and praised his works because of their confirmation of the 'practical,' 'experimental,' and 'realistic' character of Tantra, as well as because of its accordance with Western philosophy, especially Idealism and Monism.¹¹⁷ Pramathanath was one of Woodroffe's most important partners, assisting him, for instance, with the preparation of *The Garland of Letters* (1922).¹¹⁸ Whole chapters from the pen of Pramathanath are reproduced in *Shakti and Shakta*, as well as in the education-focused *Bharata Shakti* (1917).

This corroborates how science and education were central to the discussion of the relationship between India and the West in the works of Avalon and the people connected to the project. Indeed, Woodroffe made a point of engaging with living philosophical and religious thought in India, which was not only interesting for archaeologists but of utmost importance for the future of humanity: 'My own conviction is that an examination [sic] of Indian Vedantic Doctrine shows that it is, in important respects, in conformity with the most advanced scientific and philosophic thought of the West, and that where this is not so it is Science which will go to Vedanta and not the reverse.'¹¹⁹

Woodroffe's sincerity in engaging with contemporary Indian thought becomes palpable not only in his extensive collaboration with Pramathanath but also through the many references to Indian scientists, historians and philosophers: most notably, Jagadishchandra Chattopadhyay's *Hindu Realism* (1912), Brajendranath Seal's *Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus* (1915), the experiments by Jagadish Bose that were praised during the Swadeshi period, and the philosophical work of G. R. Malkani. Woodroffe had personal links to most of these scholars, which evidences his deep involvement in the Indian intellectual landscape.

Holding that Shakta Tantra was a form of Advaita Vedanta (the complex set of doctrines postulating the ultimate unity of everything in Brahman), Woodroffe and Pramathanath believed that they were also in accordance with modern Monism. Rather than through 'abstract speculation,'

¹¹⁵Strube, 'Tantra as Experimental Science.'

¹¹⁶John Woodroffe, *The World as Power: Reality* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1922), 15–16.

¹¹⁷E.g., *Shakti and Shakta: Essays and Addresses on the Shakta Tantrashastra*, 3 ed. (Madras/London: Ganesh & Co./Luzac & Co., 1929), 28, 75, 665; John Woodroffe, *The Serpent Power: Being the Shat-Chakra-Nirupana and Paduka-Panchaka*, 2nd ed. (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1924), 302.

¹¹⁸*The Garland of Letters (Varnamālā): Studies in the Mantra-Shāstra* (Madras/London: Ganesh & Co./Luzac & Co., 1922), 40.

¹¹⁹Woodroffe, *Reality*, 6–7.

Tantric *sādhana* supposedly led to the realization of ultimate non-duality through yogic *experience*.¹²⁰ In fact, the ‘currently accepted and orthodox scientific teaching’ was only confirming ancient truths: ‘Alchemical and Mystical schools and lately systems of scientific monism which affirm unity in the form of a Fundamental Substance and its development into various modes of itself.’¹²¹ In order to prove these correlations, Woodroffe related the ancient shastras to the work of modern scholars such as Haeckel, Huxley, William James, Oliver Lodge, Émile Boirac and Gustave Le Bon.¹²² Apart from Monism, Vitalism seemed to be especially ‘on the right track’ for grasping the fact that ‘Life is a Power, a form of Consciousness which directs matter. But it is right to say that the cause of Life is immanent in matter as the Power which manifests as both Matter and Life.’¹²³

Unsurprisingly, Woodroffe praised contemporary trends that most enthusiastically embraced such ideas. Next to occultism, he regarded New Thought and Christian Science as especially promising: ‘All these western movements are further instances of the approximation, which is now taking place, of modern western and ancient Indian thought.’¹²⁴ The popularity of the philosophy and practice of ‘occult powers’ and yoga in the West seemed only natural to Woodroffe, as he believed the doctrines of modern occultism and Spiritualism to be validated by the shastras.¹²⁵ In the last title of the *World of Power* series, *Mahāmāyā* from 1929, Woodroffe and Pramathanath stressed: ‘In India, the Vedantic doctrine has afforded a wide and firm basis for the understanding of our common as well as ‘occult’ experiences.’¹²⁶

National education and religion were the instruments for creating a synthesis of Western and Indian science. In 1919, Woodroffe lectured extensively at the aforementioned National Council of Education, of which Pramathanath and other anti-colonial intellectuals were members.¹²⁷ Woodroffe called for a ‘Religion of Power’ that should regenerate Indian society on the basis of Shakta Tantra. The corresponding chapter in *Bharata Shakti* was penned by Pramathanath and asserted the importance of religion of ‘national education.’¹²⁸ It is also noteworthy that Woodroffe presided over the Vivekananda Society, to which he lectured about Vivekananda’s insistence on *svadharma*, quoting his statement that ‘our strength, nay, our national life is in our religion.’¹²⁹ Nalinimohan Chattopadhyay, a member of the Indian Rationalistic Society who was responsible for the publication of *Bharata Shakti*, similarly underscored in the preface that the ‘basis of all culture and the maker of all nationality is Religion.’¹³⁰ Science, religion, esotericism and education were, in short, part and parcel of this cross-cultural collaboration on the awakening of the ‘true Indian Self,’ which had significant links to local developments in India as well as in Europe and North America.

Conclusion

My exploration of ‘Hindu revivalism’ and the diverse debates related to it has demonstrated the effectiveness of focusing on both diachronic and synchronic developments that structured the

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 89, 107.

¹²¹John Woodroffe and Pramathanātha Mukhopādhyāya, *The World as Power: Power as Matter* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1923), 15.

¹²²Taylor, *Woodroffe*, 194–202.

¹²³John Woodroffe, *The World as Power: Power as Life* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1922), 21–22, cf. x–xi.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, xxi–xxii; cf. Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta*, 127.

¹²⁵*The World as Power: Power as Mind* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1922), xv–xvi, 30.

¹²⁶John Woodroffe and Pramatha Nātha Mukhopādhyāya, *Mahāmāyā: The World as Power: Power as Consciousness* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1929), 188.

¹²⁷Woodroffe, *Garland*, preface.

¹²⁸*Bharata Shakti: Collection of Addresses on Indian Culture* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1921), 54–61.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 49–51.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, viii.; cf. Taylor, *Woodroffe*, 83–85.

controversial issue of modernity versus tradition. Despite the manifold asymmetries between the colonizers and the colonized, debates about modernity, nationalism and science were not a one-way road. Indians actively participated in shaping contested understandings of modernity, including allegedly ‘traditional’ pandits who, like Shivachandra and his associates, did not inhabit a self-contained and isolated sphere.¹³¹ The region where Shivachandra and other pandits received their education—the district of Nadiya—provided a vivid, intellectually fluid environment marked by interactions with Islam, dynamics between Shaivas and Vaishnavas and exchanges with European intellectuals.¹³² Against that background, lines between ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘reform’ were extremely porous, both on the level of content (for instance, education, girls’ schools, women’s rights, the betterment of disadvantaged castes or dialogue between different factions) and on the level of membership and institutions, as has become particularly obvious in light of the Theosophical Society and the personal constellation behind Arthur Avalon.

The rejection of ‘Western influences’ among these actors was highly ambiguous. It did not imply an actual isolation from ‘modernity’ but engagement with debates about its meaning. Overt attempts at a synthesis of ‘Western’ and Indian thought, as they could be observed in the work of Pramathanath and Woodroffe, did not simply consist in an ‘adoption’ of ‘Western ideas,’ as they unfolded against a vastly complex background of local traditions and learning. It would be mistaken to perceive these exchanges in terms of the meeting of two distinct cultural spheres; rather, notions such as religion and science were contested and negotiated through global exchanges that conditioned and transformed the ideas of all their participants.¹³³ At the same time, it is important to emphasize that this did not constitute a global homogenization, not only because it would be misleading to assume an essence of ‘Western thought’ unchanged by the encounter with Indian intellectuals, but also because of the nationalist and anti-colonial impulses sparked by these interactions. By adopting a decentered perspective operationalized through a genealogical method, global religious history has offered an effective approach to explore the intricate tangle of exchanges surrounding Shivachandra and his associates. This allowed for insights into debates that were shaped by highly diverse actors across the globe, by focusing on Bengal as a nodal point, combining micro- with macro-perspectives and considering both diachronic and synchronic developments. Such an approach might hopefully inspire future discussions between religious studies and global history.

Julian Strube works about the relationship between religion and politics since the nineteenth century from a global history perspective. In his earlier work, he investigated radical political and religious reform movements in the contexts of European socialism, National Socialism, *völkisch* movements, occultism, Spiritualism and Theosophy. Since the completion of his PhD, he has examined these and related subjects within the context of a global religious history, with a focus on India, Europe and North America. He specifically concentrates on how the relationship between religion, science and politics has been negotiated among Bengali intellectuals in exchange with non-Indian interlocutors within the colonial context.

¹³¹Michael S. Dodson and Brian A. Hatcher, ‘Introduction’, in *Trans-Colonial Modernities in South Asia*, ed. Michael S. Dodson and Brian A. Hatcher (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 2–3; Brian A. Hatcher, ‘Pandits at Work: The Modern Shastric Imaginary in Early Colonial Bengal’, in *Trans-Colonial Modernities in South Asia*, ed. Michael S. Dodson and Brian A. Hatcher (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

¹³²Bordeaux, ‘Mythic King’; Joshua Ehrlich, ‘New Lights on Raja Krishnachandra and Early Hindu-European Intellectual Exchange’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (2020).

¹³³This has been similarly argued by J. Barton Scott, who employs the notion ‘transnational nineteenth-century reform assemblages’ in contrast to understandings of hybridity that, despite Homi Bhabha’s original intention, tend to reproduce the idea of the blending of two distinct cultures. See J. Barton Scott, *Spiritual Despot: Modern Hinduism and the Genealogies of Self-Rule* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 90–96.